

STATE OF ALASKA

TONY KNOWLES, GOVERNOR

DEPT. OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

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DIVISION OF ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH DIRECTOR'S OFFICE

555 CORDOVA STREET
ANCHORAGE, ALASKA 99501
<http://www.state.ak.us/dec/deh>

Telephone: (907) 269-7644
Fax: (907) 269-7654
e-mail: jadair@envircon.state.ak.us

February 11, 2000

Food and Drug Administration (FDA)
Dockets Management Branch (HFA-305)
5630 Fishers Lane, Room 1061
Rockville, Maryland 20852

Re: Docket No. 97N-0074

To Whom It May Concern:

Within the State of Alaska, the Division of Environmental Health in the Department of Environmental Conservation is tasked with the oversight and implementation of all food safety programs. Local jurisdictions are not required to provide this service, and with only one exception, none do in Alaska. Therefore, as the food safety agency for Alaska, we offer the following comments on the Draft Preliminary Food Safety Strategic Plan (Draft Plan), dated January 7, 2000.

We appreciate that the Council on Food Safety has provided such a strong focus on sound science and risk assessment/management in the Draft Plan. We agree that setting priorities for food safety must be based on the risks posed. This is the approach we follow in Alaska.

We are concerned however that the Draft Plan, while attempting to be a national plan as opposed to a federal plan, misses the mark in some critical areas. For example, the plan seems to question the role state governments play in the food safety scheme. In the section entitled, "Food Safety Regulation Today," the plan states "...the draft plan takes into account the strengths various state food safety systems *may* bring to the protection of food, and makes recommendations about how the federal government *might* build on those systems as well." (emphasis added) We believe "may" should be eliminated and "might" be changed to "can." These changes make sense if we are to have an *integrated* food safety system.

That phrase itself -- "integrated food safety system" -- needs definition. What the system is, and the roles each level of government plays in it must be clearly understood. Likewise, many of the action items need to be more definitive, with a clear understanding of how they will be accomplished and who will responsible for seeing they are done. Absent that kind of clarity, it will be difficult if not impossible to measure progress toward success.

Safe Food, Safe Water, Healthy Communities

97N-0074

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Specific comments:

Risk Management Goal; Objective 1:

We agree that FDA should establish the basic criteria for effective food safety programs that will assure the American public of the safety of their food supply. However, care must be taken that it does not result in the type of relationship states have with other federal agencies where strict standards have resulted in states being unable to deal with their own priorities as they instead strive to deal with national priorities. We have found that innovation is easier done at the state level. Nationally enforced standards can hamper creative ideas as well as the ability of states to deal with the realities of their geography and cultures.

Risk Management Goal; Objective 2

Again, we agree that the ability of all levels of the food safety net need to be upgraded, but critical to making this objective a reality is an understanding of the role each level of government plays so as to know what abilities are needed and where. We believe that the states should have the primary role for inspection and enforcement, as well as for educating the industry and public on the standards set by the FDA. FDA on the other hand, should have the primary responsibility for risk assessment, research, and establishing standards. However, as we've previously noted, national standards must allow states to deal with state-specific needs without penalty.

Risk Management Goal; Objective 5

Standardized or uniform competencies and approaches to food safety between and among the states and federal government are critical. We are in full support of the action items listed for this objective.

Risk Management Goal; Objective 6

The Draft Plan seems to slip back into a federal plan in many of the action items listed for this objective. The interagency task force recommendation for developing or implementing programs to address areas where mandatory standards do not exist must be composed of *both* state and federal members at a minimum.

Likewise, many states already have incentives to improve food safety. The Draft Plan should recommend assessing the effectiveness of those incentives and sharing the successes with other states. Alaska, for example, has a recognition program for both retail food and food processing establishments that voluntarily go beyond the requirements of our program. Through an agreement with our tourism marketing agency, those establishments may get special attention in those marketing efforts.

Risk Management Goal; Objective 8

Upgrading the ability of all levels of government to conduct outbreak investigations is critical. However, as we have previously stated, such an objective cannot be obtained unless and until the role each level of government plays is understood.

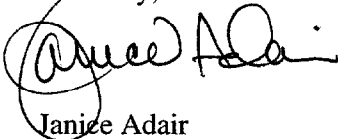
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Risk Communication; Objective 1

Each of the action items listed for this objective are laudable indeed. However, it is critically important that the sharing of information be seen as a two way street. Not only do we need timely information from all of the federal food agencies, we must have that information in a manner we can use. This is especially important as the states move to performance based budgeting. Without usable information from the federal food agencies, we cannot accurately report to our own legislatures on food safety issues in our state. When we cannot do that, our effectiveness and our perceived usefulness to food safety is compromised.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide you with these comments.

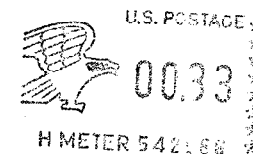
Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Janize Adair", written over a circular stamp or seal.

Janize Adair
Director

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State of Alaska
Department of Environmental Conservation
555 Cordova Street
Anchorage, AK 99501



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